Certification with a Capital "C"

The announcement of the National Certification Program for Massage Therapists (see AMTA Update September 1989) has caused a lot of discussion about the meaning of certification as a professional credential. Specifically, there has been some confusion regarding how National Certification differs from other certifications in massage therapy, and how it relates to AMTA Active Membership status and the Membership Entrance Examination.

A credential is a title or designation indicating that a certain achievement has been made by an individual or an institution. Some publicly recognized credentials include college degrees (e.g. Doctor of Philosophy, PhD), state licensing (e.g. licensed nurse), and some well known professional credentials (e.g. Certified Public Accountant, CPA).

Small "c" Certification

Certification is a credential that is available to individuals in a particular occupation. In a generic sense, the term "certification" is used to indicate that a person has either met a standard, passed an examination or completed a course of study resulting in her being "certified" by some agency, institution or person.

Speaking figuratively, this could be thought of as a small "c" certification. In this small "c" sense, certification may be awarded for a number of reasons. For example, a person may have passed a knowledge or skill test, attended a one day workshop, finished a home study course or completed a three year training.

Anyone can offer small "c" certifications, and consumers should ask pointed questions about the credibility and quality of any such program. Who is giving the certification? What are their qualifications? What kind of training is involved and for how long? Or if a test is given, what does it measure and how was it developed?

Advertising as being "certified" creates an illusion of competency. But in the generic sense, being a "certified massage therapist" could have many different meanings and does not in itself guarantee a high level of competency.

Capital "C" Certification

Professional certification, on the other hand, is a term with more specific meaning – certification with a capital "C". It is offered by either a professional association or by a private independent agency (nongovernmental) which identifies persons in a particular occupation who have met a specific standard of practice. It is designed to measure competency.

Professional certification is done on a voluntary basis and is not required to practice in the field. Note that this is not mandatory licensure created by a state government. To confuse matters, some government agencies call their licensure programs "certification," but this is more accurately called "statutory certification" and not the "professional certification" we are discussing here.

Professional certification programs are themselves endorsed by approval agencies which assure the public that the program has met certain standards including open access, objectivity, fairness, validity and reliability. The AMTA is seeking the endorsement of an approval agency for our National Certification Program. The one chosen endorses certifications in the health professions, i.e., the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

In order to get their endorsement, the AMTA must follow strict guidelines for test development and administration. With the NCCA endorsement, the National Certification Program will demonstrate professional accountability and so have better credibility among other health professionals and regulatory agencies.

To review, there will be three layers involved in the National Certification Program for Massage Therapists. The approval agency (NCCA) will endorse the National Certification which will in turn offer professional certification to individual massage therapists. Endorsement by the approval agency will give professional credibility – with a capital "C" – to the National Certification Program.

AMTA Membership and Certification

Some members have commented: "What is this National Certification? I thought I already was certified by the AMTA."

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

It is true that in the past, AMTA Active Membership was considered a type of certification. But it was actually of the generic or small "c" variety.

And in the past, this made sense because there were few national credentials in massage therapy, and practitioners needed a way to present themselves to the public. The AMTA served as a source of national recognition because we applied membership standards, especially since there is a Membership Entrance Examination for those not graduating from AMTA Approved Training Programs.

The AMTA Membership Examination does not meet the current standards for professional certification programs, and was never really designed to be a capital "C" certification. Calling it certification creates a lot of confusion with the National Certification Program for Massage Therapists currently being developed.

To avoid this confusion, Active Members are asked to discontinue using the term "certified" and to simply use instead "Active Member of the American Massage Therapy Association." Along the same line of reasoning, it is incorrect to call the Membership Entrance Examination a certification exam. The Examination is merely a device for identifying those who have the minimum knowledge and skills for acceptance as members of the AMTA.

Two Separate Things

AMTA membership and the National Certification Program will be two separate things. You might be an AMTA member and choose not to get National Certification, or you will be able to get National Certification without being an AMTA member (as per NCCA guidelines) or you may have both or neither.

To reinforce this distinction, the National Board voted in January 1990 to remove the word "certify" from the membership certificate and to insert instead "this is to verify that (name) is an Active member..."

Members are asked to support and adjust to these changes as we become more professionally oriented and move forward into the 1990's. If this discussion has made you more confused than enlightened, and you would like to discuss it further, please give us a call at the National Education Office at (312) 761-AMTA. We'd be happy to talk it over with you.

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